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ABSTRACT

The essay in this issue of "Insights" develops the theses that children's language environment is the key to their language development, that the school setting and language arts program contribute little to language development, and that greater use of the best of children's books could significantly enhance children's language development. The essay focuses on children's preschool and elementary school experiences and discusses using two specific children's books --"Diary of an Early American Boy" by Eric Sloane and "Watership Down" by Richard Adams--as starting points for instruction. (JM)

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Language Development and Children's Books in Intermediate Classrooms

by Sheldon Schmidt

An Introduction

by Clara A. Pederson

Do You Know

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INSIGHTS into open education

Language Development and Children's Books in Intermediate Classrooms

By Sheldon Schmidt

Introduction

Language enhancing experiences leading to the development of high level communication skills have changed little over the years and remain inextricably tied to one's language environment and the valuing of purposeful interaction with others. Rich, positive, personally meaningful oracy and literacy experiences can and need be a continuing part of a child's out-of-school as well as in-school experience: rich in that language experiences should be broad and varied enough to extend both the child's use and storage of language patterns as well as understanding and appreciation of the potential in language; positive in that language experiences should lead to initiation of more frequent and rewarding language interactions; and personally meaningful in that the role language plays in self understanding and social adjustment should be given balanced consideration alongside concern for development of the mechanics of literacy.

One's language begins developing at birth and has the potential for continuous development throughout adulthood. Language development, like intellectual development, is more than just the collection of some skills and content. The ability to use and manipulate personal language profits immeasurably from the continuous processing and reprocessing of language read and heard and when many opportunities are available to engage in personally meaningful and rewarding utterances. Language development is basic to cognitive, emotional, social and language-skills development.

The theses of this essay are that one's language environment is the key to language development; that the school setting and language (arts) programs (i.e. learning to decode print, learning the mechanics of writing, learning to describe one's language in the nomenclature of grammarians) do little to enhance language development; and that making greater use of the best of children's books could significantly enhance the language development of children.

Section I, below, will describe, compare and contrast the preschool and elementary school language experience of children.

Section II will focus on the importance of experiencing the language and content in the best of children's books to enhance the language development of children in elementary school as well as to serve as integrative instructional starting points.

Section III, to appear in a later issue of INSIGHTS this year, will describe how teachers may begin to move away from the exclusive use of textbooks and workbooks in the intermediate grades, to give some specific examples of "theme" teaching and to describe some of the many published materials and resources available to teachers in this area.

Language Development and the Pre School Experience

It is important to note that a very young child does not make what is truly a phenomenal growth in language development because someone sits him down to learn individual words, phrases and sentence patterns or because someone carefully structures and sequences the language he encounters, but because he becomes part of the continuity of a language-rich environment provided by parents and older siblings engaged in the on-going personal, social and business interactions of their own lives. The language of the home triggers and supports the child's innate capacity to sort, to test and to generalize just how the language works and to begin the process of intentional interaction.

In a very real sense the baby is placed in a language pool, in language over his head, and left to learn to swim on his own. Why does it work? It works because the child is permitted to play, to practice, to imitate, to err, to process, to store and to reprocess language in a positive and supportive atmosphere, in the absence of external pressures and frustrations and because ego-damaging demands for "standard" performance are kept to a minimum. Parents and siblings know that a child will begin to speak and understand in his own good time and that it may vary greatly from the time schedule of older brother or sister. What the child has learned is reinforced, with little concern for what has not been learned. The motivation for rapid language development in early childhood seems simply to be an internally triggered frustration accompanying the desire to communicate more and more effectively with those in the family circle.

As the child grows older, and if there is adequate personality and social development, he outgrows the language environment of the home. Continued language development requires that the child be introduced to an ever broader range of language usage. The child's need for a richer language environment is met naturally as the parents begin to take the child with them shopping and visiting neighbors and relatives, hire babysitters, read him children's books and as the child begins to listen to recordings and listen to and watch television.

The keys to continued language development, in addition to the child's innate potential for language, seem always to be: 1) contact with a language environment far superior to his own ability to produce language, and 2) the internal motivation to interact with a broader range of people and in an ever broadening range of discourse.

In contrast to the above, an educator given charge of a child's language development at birth would certainly attempt to protect the child from the frustration of a too rich language environment, a language too difficult for him to fully understand or accurately reproduce, and would probably not permit the child to determine his own rate of progress largely untested, unlabeled and ungraded for six years. Instead, because we live in a professional world of behaviorally stated and prioritized objectives and accountability, the educator would determine "normal" rate of progress, sequence instruction into small-enough chunks for the child to demonstrate some new mastery at six or nine week intervals, label the child as slow, average or fast and proceed with the instruction. We might question whether the child would learn as much, feel as positive about using and learning language or whether the learning would have been as economical as is learned in non school environments.

Before discussing language development during the years of formal schooling, it is important to note two items: 1) The remarkable language development of a six-year-old is accomplished without any of the trappings of the formal instruction as we know it in schools. Are the language development needs of the six to twelve-year-old so different that no consideration need be given to the zero to six mode of language development? 2) While the six-

year-old has a remarkable language, it is a six-year-old's language. If the child is to continue to grow-up intellectually, emotionally and socially, his language must continue to develop.

Language Development and the School Experience

The language environment of the early school years seems to me to be, at best, a "mixed bag." Experiencing the teacher's language of instruction provides, for a time, a new dimension to the child's need for an ever expanding language environment. There is great value in the daily reading to children and time given to children to engage in independent (SSR) reading. There is also value in direct instruction in concepts and vocabulary.

The negative aspects are that the language of instruction does not change much over the six years of elementary school; less and less time is given to independent reading and for most children it is done only when and if all other work is completed; there is little follow-up and/or discussion of books read; reading programs continue to corner the largest share of the school time, but little vocabulary beyond what is already in the child's listening vocabulary is covered, and, except when the basal readers include excerpts from children's books, few lessons include language capable of extending the child's already developed language repertoire; writing programs get a minimum of time and much of it is concerned with handwriting and the mechanics of written expression; language programs, ignoring research regarding benefits to children, continue to focus on teaching the grammarian's nomenclature and teaching <u>about</u> language rather than teaching children how to manipulate language to arrive at better articulated ideas; spelling programs add little if anything to language development. So, while so-called language programs (reading, writing, spelling, etc.) are very important, when in the school day, week or year are children emersed in the deep and broad "language pool" that has always been the basis for continued language growth?

There are other problems. There is generally only one adult in the classroom. The teacher does most of the talking and that talk, like the instructions in the published materials, is necessarily geared to the child's present language development rather than to extending or enhancing the child's language. While the child's preschool experience in the home was full of parent talk about life and death and marriage and divorce and love and hatred and friendship and prejudice and growing up, when in school is the content of the real world discussed openly? When are children permitted to discuss/argue personal positions and express and examine personal values significantly different from those held by the middle-class mainstream of the teaching profession?

If the motivation to develop better language skills is dependent upon the child's desire to interact more adequately with others, can the relatively sterile school setting, wherein a teacher does most of the talking and children spend endless noncommunicative hours filling in workbook and ditto pages, do anything other than obstruct the child's language development?

Formal education for the twelve-year-old and under is not universally accepted as being more beneficial than harmful for children. This is true because the psychological environment of the school and the behavioral requirements are so different from the child's preschool environment. This is true, also, because the school's expectation is that children learn in an entirely different manner once they turn six than they did before six. Rohwer,[1] after reviewing considerable evaluative research, states (p. 337)

> ". . . what are the implications for the content and practice of school for children aged 11-12 and under? A strong implication might be that formal

school prior to these ages should be abandoned on the grounds that it does more harm than good."

While I am not suggesting that school programs be abandoned for children twelve and under, I am concerned, as are many others, about the continued use of educational practices which appear to have the effect of lowering a child's ultimate intellectual potential. It must be kept in mind that learning to read, write, spell, etc., as important as they are, do not in themselves enhance a child's language, intellectual, emotional or social development in even a concomitant way. They could, however, if the materials used as the starting points for instruction in these areas were in themselves models of rich, high-quality language usage and presented an intellectually rich content in a setting that permitted the child to easily connect that content to the real lives of people.

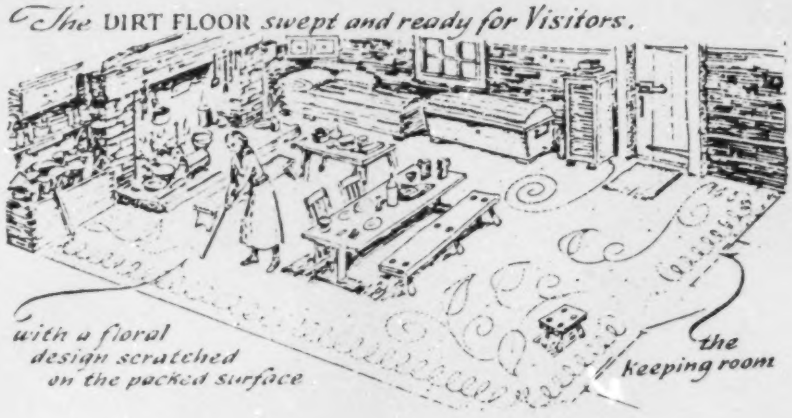
Using Children's Books As Starting Points for Instruction - Making Connections

I can think of no vehicle other than children's books that can provide children with a rich language usage and appropriate content, while at the same time assisting the child in making connections between the content and its application to the real lives of people. In addition, children's books are available in abundance in schools and encourage children to explore a variety of sources when studying a particular topic.

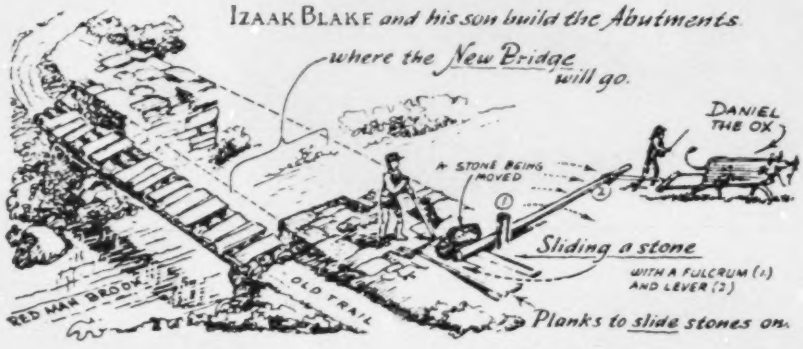
In his Diary of an Early American Boy, Eric Sloane[2] has put together what could easily be the centerpiece for study of 17th century rural America. This diary of a real boy, Noah Blake, is dated in 1805 and details the construction of a whole backwoods farm and mill. Over 70 handdrawn illustrations are woven into the fabric of the text, illustrating tools and the use of tools, the building of a King Post bridge, folk art, children's games, clothing, furniture, principles of physics used to lift, slide and carry heavy loads, the making of nails, etc. Four short passages will illustrate 1) the author's ability to present important content while at the same time connecting it to the daily living of real people, 2) the language-rich text and 3) the author's special concern for the reader's vocabulary and point of view:

(p. 3)
"That March dawn in the year 1805 seemed like any other dawn. Yet to Noah there was something different. Clearer and more crimson than a sunset, the morning sun blazed out of the east and struck the four small panes of his window as if they were its prime target. Glass was hard enough to come by in pioneer days, but these panes had special meaning. Made in faraway London, they had been Noah's tenth birthday gift from his mother and father five years ago. Before Noah's tenth birthday the window had been covered with one pine slab that swung outward on leather hinges along the top. This made it impossible to leave the window open all during warm weather except for the stormiest days; the rain fell away from the opening, running off the pine slab as if it were an awning."

(p. 8)
"Get the floor ready for visitors," Izaak would say, and the procedure which followed would amuse anyone of today. Rachel would sweep the hard-packed floor and then with a stick she would scratch designs upon it in the manner of a decorative carpet."

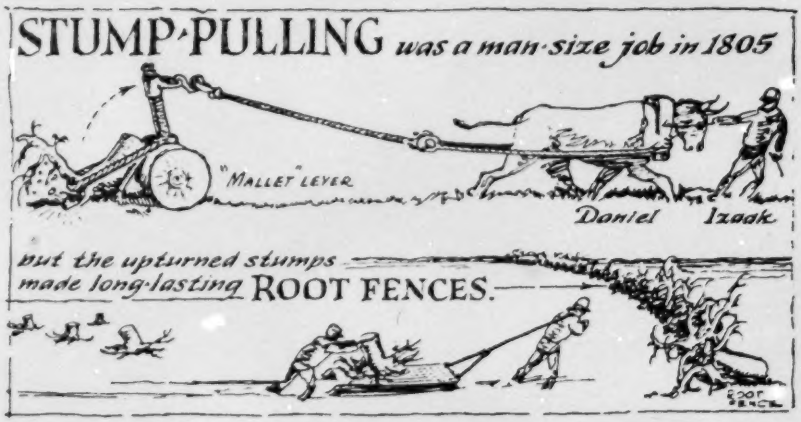


(p. 17)
"All the stones for the Blake bridge were fitted together by Izaak, but the actual moving of the heaviest stones was accomplished with a leverpole fulcrum which was operated by Daniel the ox. You might wonder how the pioneers moved some of the great stones that you see in old walls and foundations; the secret was simply in their ability to slide things. A two-ton slab of rock that could not be lifted or carted by wagon, could be slid to location with ease just by waiting for winter and sliding the stone over ice."


IZAAK BLAKE and his son build the Abutments where the New Bridge will go.
DANIEL THE OX
A STONE BEING MOVED
Sliding a stone
WITH A FULCRUM (1) AND LEVER (2)
RED MAN BROOK
OLD TRAIL
Planks to slide stones on.

(p. 29)
"Both stump-pulling and finding "hoop wood" were spring chores of early times. After the ground had heaved and settled when winter was done, roots were looser and the big tree stumps were then easier to pull out. The tough roots were almost impossible to burn,

so farmers used to push them into fence formation that wasn't very pretty to look at, but lasted for many more years than an ordinary fence. Even now in Canada and on some remote farms, you will find good root-fences almost a century old!"



The book is rich in starting points for learning about physics, math, history, sociology, clothing, economics, our changing language, religious practice, celebrating holidays, tool making, carpentry, mills, etc. While the book is basically expository a rich imagery and metaphor is commonplace: (p. 102)

> "The mill wheel was 'under way.' The wood was not old enough to have worn itself into the smoothness of a nearly perfect wheel, so there were unnatural rumblings and shudderings now and then that caused Izaak to cock his head and listen. It was like listening to the breathing of a first-born child. Then he stopped listening, and his face assumed a pleased expression."

Unlike most textbooks, the content is attached to a family that would help children personalize the content to be learned. Educators often forget that personal/family experiences are the most concrete experiences of early childhood.

There are many bridges that can be built between fact and fiction and narrative and expository writing which can help children learn to cope with the "difficult" in the real world. Adams'[3] Watership Down closes with the death of Hazel: (p. 425)

> "One chilly, blustery morning in March, I cannot tell exactly how many springs later, Hazel was dozing and waking in his burrow. He had spent a good deal of time there lately, for he felt cold and could not seem to smell or run so well as in days gone by. He had been dreaming in a confused way--something about rain and elder bloom--when he woke to realize that there was a rabbit lying quietly beside him--no doubt some young buck who had come to ask his advice. The sentry in the run outside should not really have let him

in without asking first. Never mind, thought Hazel. He raised his head and said, "Do you want to talk to me?"

"Yes, that's what I've come for," replied the other. "You know me, don't you?"

"Yes, of course," said Hazel, hoping he would be able to remember his name in a moment. Then he saw that in the darkness of the burrow the stranger's ears were shining with a faint silver light. "Yes, my lord," he said. "Yes, I know you."

"You've been feeling tired," said the stranger, "but I can do something about that. I've come to ask whether you'd care to join my Owsla. We shall be glad to have you and you'll enjoy it. If you're ready, we might go along now."

They went out past the young sentry, who paid the visitor no attention. The sun was shining and in spite of the cold there were a few bucks and does at silflay, keeping out of the wind as they nibbled the shoots of spring grass. It seemed to Hazel that he would not be needing his body any more, so he left it lying on the edge of the ditch. . ."

By the time children come to the end of Watership Down, Hazel is real to them, and the emotion attached to his passing is not unlike the emotion that may later be attached to the death of a friend, a grandparent or other family member. After finishing the last few paragraphs in the book (I was reading to a mixed group of children) a third grader said, "Hazel died, didn't he? (pause) I really liked Hazel." (pause) A fifth grader said, "Lord Furth came to get him." There was another long pause, some sad smiles and then the children began reminiscing about their favorite parts of the book and some special things Hazel had done. They were able, individually, to cope with the death of a really good and close friend in the only way one can, remembering all the happy, difficult, adventuresome times they had spent together. If the context is appropriate, and providing an appropriate context is one of the special skills of a really good writer, and if the topic arises naturally and appropriately, children will deal with any issue at a level appropriate to their own development.

A death reported in Diary of an Early American Boy is stated more realistically and in a matter-of-fact tone, but could be shared (compared) appropriately and in contrast to Adams' description. Sloane[4] (p. 54-5):

"27: Thursday. This has been a poor day. Daniel is dead.

When Noah had gone to the barn that morning, he noticed Bessie at the door. It had always been Daniel who came to greet him first. Bessie had called with her usual low moo the instant she saw Noah coming, but there was no sign of Daniel.

When Noah reached the barn he saw Daniel lying in the hay. His eyes were open, but they were not focused on anything. It was clear that Daniel was dead.

Noah went inside and sat on the big body, which was still warm and soft. He must have been there for some time,

and he must have remembered all the work and good times that he had lived through with Daniel. The big animal had become a part of the household, for he had helped to build it. He had helped to build the new bridge, even to pull the first logs for the old bridge. All the clearing and plowing was his work.

After a long while Noah felt the body beneath him growing stiff and cold. He rose slowly and opened the door to let Bessie out. But for the first time, the old cow stood still and refused to leave the barn. Noah walked toward the house as if he were dragging all the weight that Daniel had pulled over those fields. It would be difficult to break the news.

28: We buried Daniel. Father says we shall have a horse.

29: Mother layed out her flower garden today. I finished sooting the orchard trees.

30: Sunday. I told Sarah about Daniel. We shall plant a fine tree over his grave.

The use of good children's books as starting points for instruction instead of textbooks and workbooks seems important because there does not seem to be time for both. Teachers who conscientiously take the children through all of the textbooks and workbooks purchased for their class do not have time to give to wide-reading of children's books and for follow-up activity. Factors that weigh in favor of using children's books are that they are sufficiently numerous to cover almost any content found in the textbook; the children are not limited to one source and, while some children's books may be fictionalized accounts of what would be studied in the textbook, the comparison of differing accounts would make an important contribution to a child's learning to use a variety of sources and to deal logically and thoroughly with discrepancies in published materials; while textbooks are only able to skim lightly over the vast amount of content needed to be included in them, individual children's books can and do go into great detail regarding a particular subject; children reading broadly around a central theme or unit topic can contribute much more to discussion than when all children read the same material; finally, children reading broadly in children's books requires that the teacher do less talking and become less of the expert and more of a participant in the learning.

This last point is especially important in terms of the relationships of power and social and psychological distance between teacher and children that influences so greatly the languaging, questioning and thinking of the children in a classroom. Cazden[6] writes (p. 22) "Teacher talk can maintain power as well as express it . . . (p. 25) "There is accumulating evidence that power relationships exert a constraining effect on the language of the less powerful person (the student). . . . children's responses to other children's questions are more complex than their responses to adult's questions. . ." (p. 26) ". . . children freely ask information questions of each other, but never of adults (in power positions). . . ." Which means that children often willingly stay uninformed about something because of an inhibition to ask an information question of the teacher. (p. 26) "Power tempered with intimacy may partly explain why parents can be such superb teachers of the truly remarkable learnings that happen in the preschool years. . . ." Although further research needs to be done, Cazden hypothesizes that social and psychological distance inherent in large group, formal settings also inhibits language growth.

Starting instruction from a variety of children's books and branching out to other children's books on related topics would assist the teacher in breaking down much of the

unnecessary authority interactions between the teacher and children and provide many more opportunities for child to child interaction, informal teacher to child and child to teacher interactions, and less social and psychological distance between the teacher and children.

Finally, the integrative potential of using children's books as starting points for instruction can not be over emphasized. Much content usually identified as history or social studies or science, etc., much of the skills development in reading and language arts and many opportunities for enhancing self-understanding and social skills can all begin in the same children's book. The continuous fragmenting of instruction in many contemporary classrooms is incomprehensible to most children and although they march through their schooling "successfully", in many cases, the school has had too little lasting influence on their lives.

Foot Notes

1. Rohwer, Wm. D. Jr. Prime Time for Education: Early Childhood or Adolescence, Howard Educational Review, Vol. 41, No. 3, 1971.

2. Sloane, Eric. Diary of an American Boy. Ballantine Books, New York, 1974.

3. Adams, Richard. Watership Down. MacMillan, New York, 1972.

4. Tolkien, J. R. R. The Fellowship of the Ring. Ballantine Books, New York, 1975.

5. Cazden, Courtney B. How Knowledge About Language Helps the Classroom Teacher - Or Does It: A Personal Account, Paper presented at National Language Arts Conference of NCTE, Atlanta, Georgia, 1976.

An Introduction

Eric Carle, a very popular American author and illustrator of children's books, grew up in Germany. While living there, he attended the Akademie der bildenden Künste at Stuttgart. After returning to the United States, he worked as a graphic designer and illustrator but since 1968 has devoted his time exclusively to writing and illustrating children's books. Many of his books are published in several different languages and are sold throughout the world.

Books written and illustrated by Eric Carle include:

1, 2, 3 TO THE ZOO	Collins & World	1968
THE VERY HUNGRY CATERPILLAR	Collins & World	1969
THE TINY SEED	T. Y. Crowell	1970
PANCAKES, PANCAKES	Alfred Knopf	1970
DO YOU WANT TO BE MY FRIEND?	T. Y. Crowell	1971
THE SECRET BIRTHDAY MESSAGE	T. Y. Crowell	1971
WALTER THE BAKER	Alfred Knopf	1972
THE ROOSTER WHO SET OUT TO SEE THE WORLD	Franklin Watts	1972
HAVE YOU SEEN MY CAT?	Franklin Watts	1973
I SEE A SONG	T. Y. Crowell	1973
ALL ABOUT ARTHUR	Franklin Watts	1974
THE MIXED UP CHAMELEON	T. Y. Crowell	1975
ERIC CARLE'S STORYBOOK 7 Grimm Brothers Fairytales (retold and illustrated)	Franklin Watts	Fall 1976

12 POSTERS 3' X 5' VANISHING ANIMALS	Franklin Watts	
MY VERY FIRST LIBRARY 1) MY VERY FIRST BOOKS OF NUMBERS 2) MY VERY FIRST BOOKS OF SHAPES 3) MY VERY FIRST BOOKS OF COLORS 4) MY VERY FIRST BOOKS OF WORDS	T. Y. Crowell	1973

The following are books illustrated by him:

BROWN BEAR, BROWN BEAR By Bill Martin, Jr.	Holt, Rinehart & Winston	1970
TALES OF THE NIMIPOO By Eleanor Heady	World Publishing	1970
THE BOASTFUL FISHERMAN By William Knowlton	Alfred Knopf	1970
THE SCARECROW CLOCK By George Mendoza	Holt, Rinehart & Winston	1971
FEATHERED ONES AND FURRY By Aileen Fisher	T. Y. Crowell	1971
DO BEARS HAVE MOTHERS, TOO? By Aileen Fisher	T. Y. Crowell	1973
WHY NOAH CHOSE THE DOVE By Isaac Basheuis Singer	Farrar Straus & Giroux	1973
THE HOLE IN THE DIKE By Norma Green	T. Y. Crowell	1975

The awards he has received for his books are numerous. These include:

First Prize for Picture Books, International Children's Book Fair, Bologna, Italy - 1970 and 1972

DEVTSCHER JUGENDBUCHPREIS - 1970 and 1972 (Among the 6 best picture books in Germany)

Among "Ten Best Picture Books of the Year," The New York Times, 1969

Among "Outstanding Picture Books of the Year," The New York Times

Among "Best Children's Books," England, 1971

Selection du Grand prix des Treize, France, 1972 and 1973

Readers Prize, Japan, 1975

ALA NOTABLE, 1972

AIGA, Best Children's Book Show, 1970

Brooklyn Museum Art Books for Children Citation, 1973

Do You Know

That a series of monographs on important evaluation issues have been published by the North Dakota Study Group on Evaluation and coordinated by Vito Perrone. The booklets now available are:

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Teacher Curriculum Work Center: A Descriptive Study by Sharon Feiman

Testing and the Testing Industry: A Third View by John Williams

The Word and the Thing: Ways of Seeing the Teacher by Ann Cook and Herb Mack

Psychological Effects of Open Classroom Teaching on Primary School Children: A Review of the Research by Robert A. Horwitz

Developing Hypotheses About Classrooms from Teachers' Practical Constructs by John Elliott

These booklets are two dollars ($2.00) each and may be obtained by enclosing a check to the North Dakota Study Group on Evaluation and mail to:

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